

Transcription: James Middleton

Today is Wednesday, February 9th, 2011. My name is James Crabtree and today I'll be interviewing Mr. James Middleton. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Middleton is at the Floresville State Veterans Home in Floresville, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time today to talk to me. It's an honor for us. I guess the best place to start is just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went in the military.

James Middleton: Well, I had a very rough childhood like all boys did when I was growing. My mother died when I was 10, and of course that messed up the works. My daddy, he was a good plumber, a good electrician, and a good all-around mechanic, but at the time that I was born and when my mother died, there was nothing, there was no money. Nobody had money. I mean so I also learned to make whiskey early in life, and I used to fire the boiler and I bottled it, and I'm telling you that because that's the way it went. It didn't get any better as time went on. The goddam war come along and it was worse than the rest of it.

Where were you born, sir?

James Middleton: That's the size of when I grew up.

And where was it that you were born?

James Middleton: Well, where I've been is another story, but I went a lot of places, but I went on a train. I didn't pay my way incidentally, but I went, I rode the freight -

My question, sir, was where were you born, what was your home town?

James Middleton: Oh, I was born in Menlo, Georgia.

So you were born in Georgia. What year were you born?

James Middleton: '21.

1921. And so where were you when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

James Middleton: I was in the Army.

You were already in the Army?

James Middleton: Yeah, but I don't know exactly where I was when Pearl Harbor was bombed. I wasn't over there. I was down in Fort Benning I think.

Were you drafted into the Army or did you - ?

James Middleton: Oh no, no, I went in there way before they ever even knew how to done a draft.

Why was it that you chose to go in the Army?

James Middleton: Something to do and something to make a little money.

Was your dad supportive of your decision to go in the Army?

James Middleton: Yeah, but when my mother died, I separated with – I didn't get mad at my old man, I just left him and let him do his own thing.

Did you have any brothers and sisters?

James Middleton: Oh yes, I had an older brother and I had one sister, and I think maybe I had one other brother, a younger brother, I think so.

Did any of them go in the military, too?

James Middleton: The other boys, yeah they went, everybody, all of us went in the military, the boys. Me and my older brother. But my sisters, they didn't get in.

When you were in the Army, what was your specialty? Were you in the infantry?

James Middleton: Oh, well when, see I joined the Army before the war started and I liked horses and I liked to ride, so I joined the Cavalry. I think it was the 1st Cavalry, that was how they named it. We only had the troop I believe, and I rode all around. Hell, we did a lot of riding then. Now, slowly Roosevelt got a little money somewhere and he got enough to back him in a war I think, so we changed the Cavalry to a mechanized thing, and it wasn't worth a damn. We had a little old MH they called them, and it was the model of the thing, and it had a 37 millimeter gun on it and a couple of machine guns, had a rail, so the machine guns and the 37 all would go around I guess. We didn't go to war with that. We kept it, I don't know, until whenever we got, we finally before we got into the war, we got a tank, a light tank. It was light enough all right, probably 4 inches thick in front and along the sides, and we had a 50 caliber gun on the turret on a rail that would run around, and we had a fairly large gun on there. I think I've forgotten exactly what size it was. I know I have. But it was a pretty good gun, it was a pretty good weapon. So we were well mechanized and well organized when we went to war. I don't know when that was. Dates don't mean nothing to me.

Where did they send you though? Once the war started, do you remember where you went to? Did you go to the Pacific or the European Theater?

James Middleton: The thing I remember about the war was when we formed this, I'll think of the name in a little bit, but we formed this thing, we got a group together including my unit and a couple of infantry units and we went ashore on what was it – was D-Day June the 5th or something?

June 6th, yes sir.

James Middleton: Well, I don't even remember that. But anyway we went over there and we dusted their butts pretty good. I guess I don't know how long it took us, a week or more.

Were you part of the D-Day landing?

James Middleton: Yeah, at the D-Day landing. Yeah, I think was in another D-Day landing, but not like that one. That was a pretty -

You weren't at the one at Normandy?

James Middleton: That one at Normandy, yeah.

Were you at Normandy?

James Middleton: I was at Normandy, oh yes. That's where I've been.

Tell us about your memories of that day.

James Middleton: Well, it's kind of hard to do. I'll tell you what I can. I mean there ain't much to tell. The agony of the thing, shooting and getting shot, that was a thing that you just kind of forgot about. I mean I've tried since to forget and I'm doing good, I'm forgetting. I wish you'd have interviewed me last year. I could've been more in detail, but we mustered them Japs out of their holes and stuff. That's as much as I can tell you.

Were you in Asia or were you in Europe? You mentioned Normandy. Were you at the Normandy invasion in France or were you in Asia fighting the Japanese?

James Middleton: I landed in Normandy and then I don't know where I went after that, not for a while I don't know. It was just one hell of a fight. We lost a lot of guys and of course they lost a lot. But it wasn't good. That was the part that I wanted to – see, my wife has a, she kept a log on us all during the war there, and she has all of this stuff down pat, I believe, I think she does. Anyway, we fought 'em.

You were saying you were at Normandy. Do you remember what your thoughts were before that battle or what your commanders said to you before that battle?

James Middleton: My commander never called all of us together and spoke to us and told us we'd do this and do that or whatever. I mean hell, I was commanded by a cavalryman and he just might not have been the best in the west, I don't know.

So you don't remember your commander ever talking to you or the fellow troops?

James Middleton: No, I mean he never did -

Did you know what you guys were in for? Did you know what was coming?

James Middleton: Yeah, sure, he wasn't the only one that told us what he could, but hell, they didn't know anyway really. They had never been in one so they didn't know. But we learned right away. We learned, you can get shot there real easy.

And you said you were married. Were you married when you went into the Army?

James Middleton: I wished you hadn't asked me that question because I don't think so. I believe that I was married to my wife when the war started and I was over there, and she's been

keeping pretty good detail on all of the war. I know this because I mentioned it the other day and she had some, whether she has any of it now I don't know, but I think she does.

Were you able to write to her while you were in the war?

James Middleton: Oh yeah, I used to write to her, yeah.

Did she save any of your letters?

James Middleton: Well I'm sure she did. I don't know that, but I'm sure she did.

Yes sir. How long were you in the Army?

James Middleton: Oh, probably 40 years. See, I was in during the war, and the war ended, what, in '45?

Yes sir.

James Middleton: Well, it seems like I stayed in another year. I don't know why, but I eventually got out and stayed out three or four years, and then I went back in, not to fight a war, but I was looking for a job and they gave me a job working on radios and weapons. I did that for quite a while, I mean three or four years, and then everything got all mixed up. I don't know really, I stayed in the Army, but I don't know what I did. I was not in a fighting unit. I know that, but anyway, there I was.

How did you end up coming to Texas?

James Middleton: I guess I come to Texas maybe even before the war, I was in a little bit, but after the war I came back to Texas and I stayed damn near all the time. I'm trying to think what I did, but I know I can't. I know that I fixed radios and we had a lot of radios, recon, I was in a reconnaissance outfit and we had a lot of radios and that was one of my jobs. Some of the better guns, I fixed those. Eventually, I quit service and radios and everything because I wanted to be – I can't even think. I wanted to fix better radios and we had some better ones, and I eventually got onto that. I mean that was my job. I did that for a long time and then I just stayed in the Army, not in the fighting unit, not even in the ground bounding. But anyway I fixed radios.

And that's what brought you to Texas?

James Middleton: It was one of my jobs and I did it.

So when you retired, you just decided to stay in Texas?

James Middleton: Yes, my wife and I bought a little plot of land out here close to Fort Sam Houston. I don't mean real close, I think it's 20 miles. But we still have it, we still have the house. I started building it and then she hired some guys and they built some of it and I built some. And you know I don't even remember the house, I don't even remember anything about it. But anyway my wife is there now and she may come down here tomorrow to see me.

Oh that's great.

James Middleton: It would be, but anyway, I'm going home within a week, but I don't mean to stay. But anyway I'll go home for a while. My memory is just not much.

I can understand, I'm sure that's frustrating, but I appreciate just you letting us interview you.

James Middleton: If I'd have told you my war stories two years ago, you'd want a drink. But now, I'm trying to forget, well I've been trying to forget for a long time, and I'm trying to forget what the war was about and I'm doing all right.

I understand that you might want to forget, but the reason we do these interviews is we don't want people to forget what you and your fellow soldiers did to help keep this country going. That's the reason we do these interviews is to –

James Middleton: I'm a poor example.

Well you were there, and that means a lot.

James Middleton: I was there, yeah, I was there and I got out, but I don't know how.

Still sir, I want to emphasize to you that there's a lot of people that need to understand the level of sacrifice that our members of our military have made for them, and you were certainly a part of that, and that's why we do these interviews because we want to save these stories so people don't forget them, so people don't take for granted the freedom they have today, because I think a lot of people take it for granted, and I think you as somebody who was there, you understand what that's all about and we appreciate that.

James Middleton: Well I know what it's about, I just can't tell it.

But I think you have. I've got a picture of some of where you've been and what you've done, and while all the details might not all be there completely, I've got a pretty good idea about who you are and what you did, and I think anyone that listens to this interview, they're going to kind of have a good understanding of who you are.

James Middleton: Oh, hey, I did make general master sergeant or whatever it was before I got out.

Yes sir.

James Middleton: But I've got some pictures I'm going to show some of the folks out here, three or four, or more than that, but I rode some damn good horses. We had nice horses and I rode 'em, I know you're not too much interested in that, but I was, but they took them all away.

Did you ride the horses when you were in the cavalry early on?

James Middleton: No, I was in the cavalry first. I rode the horses in the First Cavalry and see, there wasn't enough money around to name things, and then I rode in the 7th Cavalry. We had the 7th, that was more organized.

Now the 7th Cavalry, wasn't that Custer's original outfit? Is that right?

James Middleton: Yeah, I don't know, I mean I remember it and I rode these horses and we had the horses. See we didn't keep 'em long because we got started getting mechanized, and that's what we did. We got rid of the horses and got mechanized we called it the mechanized cavalry. And it was all right. A lot of guys got killed in it, but I don't know how many.

Did you and your wife have any children?

James Middleton: Oh, we have six children. We have three daughters and three sons. Our three sons are retired from the San Antonio Police Department. They were sergeants when they retired. And the daughter, I have a daughter, she flew for American Airlines for 30 years, and she retired from that. And then I have a son that was with one of the railroads, and I don't know what he did, but he didn't work on the railroad, he was an inspector or something, some kind. My daughters, the oldest one, Sandra, is retired from the airlines, and the other two, they retired from some work that they did there, and I don't know what it was now. And they're all happy and everything is good. They have some children. One of the boys has two boys and they're scattered, one, two, and three, and so forth.

Do you get to see your children at all? Do they have a chance to come visit you occasionally?

James Middleton: Yeah, part of the time I was in the Army, hell, I lived at home. And yes, I've seen my, I haven't seen these little ones, I've got some that's 3 or 4 years old, and I don't think I've seen them, but all the others, I saw 'em. I grew up with 'em.

I understand. My question, sir, do you get to see 'em much now that you're in Floresville? Do they come down from San Antonio to visit you?

James Middleton: Oh yeah, sure. Oh yeah, of course my children all live in Texas.

That's good.

James Middleton: I know it's good. Yeah, they all the boys and girls. Now the girl, Sandra lives in New York in the summertime, and then oh, halfway between the fall and year, winter, but then she flies on down home here and lives at home most of the winter. The other girls, they live right around here.

I'm sure they're all very proud of you and proud of your service.

James Middleton: I had a brother, an older brother, he was in the Army, too.

What did he do?

James Middleton: I believe he was a ground pounder, I'm not sure, most of the time, but he didn't get shot as I remember, and he did all right. He didn't stay in it for 20 years. He joined the police department. The police department's I guess a good deal, I don't know.

And you said you were originally from Georgia, right?

James Middleton: Georgia, yeah.

What town was it in Georgia that you were born?

James Middleton: Oh, Menlo. It's a little old bitty country town over on the western side, extended western side of Georgia, and I lived there until I was 10 or so, when my mother was killed.

At that time you grew up in Georgia in the Depression of the 1930s. Did your home have electricity or running water?

James Middleton: Well no, not a lot of time, see, I was born in '20, and so you take in the late 20s, it was rougher than hell.

Did your home have electricity as a kid?

James Middleton: No, no.

And no running water?

James Middleton: Sometimes, but not all the time. Had a well mostly.

And you said when your mom died, did you still live with your dad or did you go - ?

James Middleton: I don't really, I mean I don't remember, but I went and lived with my grandfather and grandmother.

What caused your mother to pass away?

James Middleton: An accident on a truck.

Wow. I imagine that had to have been a horrible thing to deal with as a 10-year-old boy.

James Middleton: Oh yes, it was. Still is.

Did you see your dad much after you got back from the war?

James Middleton: Oh yeah, sure. We'd get together and drink up a little booze and stuff, yeah.

You had mentioned early on speaking of that, that you learned how to make moonshine.

James Middleton: Oh yes, I know how to make moonshine.

Would your dad, how would he sell that? Would he take that to someone else to sell, or people come to you? How would that work?

James Middleton: Well, the old man learned to make moonshine with other people that made moonshine, and it's all very similar anyway unless you use corn to sweeten with, that's different, and sugar, but it's a technique that's different. So yes, but surprisingly I haven't had a drink in a year, almost a year.

When you had one of those stills, did you have to put it out in the woods so the law enforcement wouldn't find it?

James Middleton: There's a lot to be known about the law, a still, a lot of times the law knew where the stills were anyway. Now I know you don't know that, but they know that, and I know it, but the old man, they made whiskey.

I guess you would cook the mash and it would cause the alcohol to rise, right, evaporate?

James Middleton: Yeah, and there's a lot of things in there. I mean it isn't just exactly putting this, that and the other together, and it's a technique that you learn about making booze, and home brew is the same way. You learn to do it and if somebody comes along that's a little better than you are, then you do what he did.

That's interesting. And so I guess my question was it had a coil? A lot of times when you were making it, the alcohol would evaporate, right? And it would go through a coil to cool?

James Middleton: Well it evaporates, but it's slow. It depends on where you have it, buried or hidden. I mean if it's cool, it doesn't change anyway, see.

I find that interesting. I know that was definitely a culture with stock car racing and all that came from the moonshiners.

James Middleton: Yeah, well now moonshiner, if he runs a car, he has to get geared for it and it takes a technique that you don't forget too soon.

Well sir, I know I've taken up a lot of your time, but again, I really want to thank you for letting us interview you today.

James Middleton: Well, I'm just sorry that I'm such a lousy interviewee.

I disagree, I've enjoyed it and I feel like I've learned a little bit, and I want to tell you, sir, that everybody here at the Land Office from Commissioner Patterson on down is proud of you for your service to our country.

James Middleton: Well thank you very much.

And this is just a small way, this interview is just a small way of saying thank you, and in about a week or so we're going to send you this interview on CDs that you can give to your family and friends, and we're also going to send you a nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson. So be looking for that in about a week or so. We'll have that in the mail to you.

James Middleton: Well now, that's very decent of you, and I thank you very much, and I'm just sorry I'm just such a lousy guy to talk to.

I disagree. I've had a good time talking to you. I really appreciate it.

James Middleton: Well anyway, I appreciate your talking to me and taking the time and so forth.

Yes sir, oh it's been great, and sir, you take care and we'll have that stuff in the mail to you in a few weeks.

James Middleton: Thank you very much.

All right sir, take care, have a good day.

James Middleton: All right, you do the same.

Bye bye.

[End of recording]